

Heidegger's radical critique of technology as an outline of social acts¹

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Abstract

The present text shows that the prevailing view of Martin Heidegger's approach to society and technology is not only based on prejudice, but more importantly works to obscure a more relevant perception of reality. Heidegger's "phenomenological hermeneutic" sought to uncover technology's hidden truth, beyond the appearance of technology as framing our existence (*Gestell*). Even if we acknowledge that technology has now reached a planetary and all-encompassing dissemination – becoming, in effect, the leading figure of our time – we still need to remain vigilant to the metaphysical notions embedded in such a characteristic. We should seek other ways of living with and within technology. A radical critique should seek topologies and "orders" that are universal and preliminary, so that by potentially exceeding every demarcation we can be liberated to a way of listening – a "hearing" (*Hören*) – to a "constellation" of a different "essence of technology".

Keywords: Heidegger; phenomenology; metaphysics; universalism; technology

I. Heidegger's contribution to an understanding of technology and the problem of society

Today we generally consider the social problematic to provide the ground for our understanding. Even our treatment of science, technology and the human is given over to a socially conditioned decidability. Society is the site where under certain conditions historically constituted humans must realise where all sciences and technologies belong.⁴

All the more astounding is it that one of the most influential bourgeois philosopher of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger⁵,

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⁴ See the remarkable overview in Hans Lenk, "Zu neueren Ansätzen der Technikphilosophie" in *Akten des 10. Deutschen Kongress für Philosophie*.

⁵ Bisher acknowledges approx. 3000 works on Heidegger [this paper was first published in 1973, *ed.*]. See H.M. Sall's forthcoming additions to his "Heidegger-Bibliographie" (Meisenheim, 1968).

didn't explicitly deal with the problem of society.⁶ This state of affairs and Heidegger's idiosyncratic language are among the most important reasons that his social philosophy at most is regarded as providing a negative perspective.⁷

What we will set out to do in this contribution is to show that such an interpretation is based on prejudice, making it more difficult to access to what remains a most remarkable conception of social interaction. Such ignorance is particularly dangerous in view of our increasing social and environmental challenges.

Heidegger carried out a radical critique of the problem of society in his "The question concerning technology" [1954/1977]. In what follows we shall provide a broad outline of Heidegger's position.

II. A basic outline of Heidegger's radical critique of technology

1. Radical critique as a phenomenological hermeneutic

Critique has a double sense in its modern and definite expression since Kant: on the one hand it provides us with rules of reason through a demarcative measure; on the other hand it has a positive sense, by which all things that do not obey the rules of reason are rejected as unreasonable.⁸ While it is true that such a definition is on the cusp of becoming dogmatic what is more crucial here is to acknowledge the way it obscures our approach to reality as a process. Consider by way of contrast Heidegger's emphasis on the "becoming" of reality which should be sought by "stepping back" from it. Terms such as "abyss" and "leap" convey an open-mindedness to the present which is oriented towards thinking. Therefore it seems reasonable that he designated his thought as a radical critique, a term which we first find in Marx.⁹ In our usage the term "radical" should be taken to include a most decisive return to the "roots" as well as a ruthless willingness to abandon any present commitment.

Heidegger occasionally referred to his thinking as a "phenomenological hermeneutic".¹⁰ By following his pointers to the significance of hermeneutics and his explicit demarcation of phenomenology¹¹ we can briefly say that the phenomenological content reveals itself in language by bracketing (*epoché*) commonly held ideas, which goes against the idea that there is a given agreement between statements and being (subject and object). This revelation comes to us *as if* it was there in the phenomena themselves, i.e., that the state of affairs "is in itself such as is being shown in the statement".¹² However, this is not to say that the statement of being should always be taken to mean an "in itself", i.e., as revealed truth, but that when being is a "possible innerworldly encounter" it is also always "concealed (hidden) or obscured". Thus, according to Heidegger, "the existential being must expressly appropriate what has come to be revealed *against* appearances and pretensions, so as to reassure oneself of its hiddenness".¹³

This constant phenomenological trait in Heidegger's thinking is not to be confused with mere habit. In other words when we clarify radical struggles¹⁴ over the truth of Being we once more radicalise our hermeneutic expression of "historically"¹⁵ interpreted facts. In Heidegger hermeneutics opens up a horizon he called "destiny" from whence states of affairs can be understood adequately. For instance, with regard to the common sociological approach by which phenomena are taken for what they are and referred to as phenomenological it should be

⁶ Heidegger stated that his analysis of craft society in *Being and Time* [trans. John Macquarrie and Edward S. Robinson, New York, 1962, ed.] was merely exemplary in design and purposefully anachronistic.

⁷ Reinhart Maurer's two essays are interesting exceptions, see "Der angewandte Heidegger" in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 77, 1970; and "Von Heidegger zur praktischen Philosophie" in *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*, vol. 1, ed. M. Riedel, Freiburg, 1972.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, Tübingen, 1962, 93-94 [*What Is a Thing?*, trans. Vera Deutsch and W. B. Barton, Jr., South Bend, In., 1968, ed.].

⁹ Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels-Werke*, vol. 1, Berlin, 1970, 385.

¹⁰ With appropriate reservations; see, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Pfullingen, 1959 ["Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York, 2001, 187-208, ed.].

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, 1963, 217.

¹² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁵ To Heidegger history does not mean "progress" but "genesis", so that a "beginning" is not by necessity "outdated". See Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen, 1957, 64-73 [*Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Chicago, 2002, ed.].

emphasized that for Heidegger such phenomena are never simple and that their “historical” becoming¹⁶ simply provides us with a necessary opportunity to break with common and scientific perceptions.

We can now see clearly that Heidegger's approach to technology works fruitfully as a radical critique and a phenomenological hermeneutic of the present. What we can also come to understand at this point is how difficult his perspective is to grasp in its often seemingly violent singularity.

2. The leading character of technology and its ambiguity

Most often we understand *technology*, as an everyday term, to mean techniques. They are considered to be man-made means that are used as aids in satisfying our needs and liberating us from the force of nature. Our technological command is still largely undisputed in this view.

From the perspective of scientific theory technologies are considered applications of the natural sciences, which are so diverse that we only with some difficulty can find a common denominator.¹⁷

Both views regard technologies as surface phenomena which nevertheless are disseminated everywhere and which have become indispensable to modern life.

When we take stock of both views, i.e. when we include their grounds and relations, then what remains is that technology now is so widely disseminated that there is no avoiding it. Technologies intervene everywhere in our human lives, our problems have become technical concerns, and things appear to us largely as technical objects.¹⁸ This planetary dissemination of technological culture, whose mastery encompasses almost everything, forces us to ask whether the most concrete character of this apparent surface phenomenon lies in its ability to direct our present age.

Reality is challenged on the grounds of its objectivity¹⁹, situated as an idea and thus turned into an object of calculation and operation.²⁰ This, in turn, is only possible when “the objectivity of reality”²¹ meets with the challenge, i.e., when reality itself makes demands. Such a delimitation of technology would suffice where we to restrict our analysis to the present and it was technology's leading character alone that would serve to establish our horizon of acts and thoughts.²² However, such a delimitation of technology would obscure its becomingness and historicity and raise it to the level of the timeless. A radical critique must set itself against such a notion by recalling the continuity between the ancient Greek notion of technique as craft and our modern idea of industrial technology. To the Greeks technological objects were still ready-to-hand, i.e. embedded in the life-world of being. As soon as they had been isolated in theory they intensified the transformation of modern technology from something that had been equally challenging to people and objects into “objectively present-at-hand”.²³ Still the modern world was present already to the Greeks as the necessary challenge posed by all thinking.

This not unproblematic outline nevertheless shows that modern technology can be conceived as the completion of the Greek notion of *techne*, is it seems inconceivable to further intensify its “challenging uncovering”.²⁴ We should also note that technology isn't self-evident, but that it represents a “historical figure” of truth. Its claim to totality is critically questioned along with its demand that we unreservedly acknowledge technology as framing our existence

¹⁶ Cf. Helmut Schelsky, *Ortsbestimmung der deutschen Soziologie*, Düsseldorf, 1959.

¹⁷ See in the original Simon Moser, “Technologie und Technokratie: Zur Wissenschaftstheorie der Technik” in *Neue Aspekte der Wissenschaftstheorie*, ed. Hans Lenk, Braunschweig, 1971, 169-177.

¹⁸ Werner Heisenberg, “Das Naturbild in der heutigen Physik”, in *Die Künste im technischen Zeitalter*, München, 1954, 60 [published in English as “Modern physics' view of nature” in *Science and culture* 31, 1965, 546-553, ed.].

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze I*, Pfullingen, 1967, 48.

²⁰ Op.cit., “Die Frage nach der Technik” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze I* [“The question concerning technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York, 1977, 3-35, ed.].

²¹ Ibid., 49.

²² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, 1964; cf. Reinhart Maurer, “Der angewandte Heidegger”, op.cit.

²³ Technology is the “most forgiving way” for being to reveal itself. See, e.g., Heidegger's speech concerning the “utmost danger” in “Die Frage nach der Technik”, op.cit., 28.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Überwindung der Metaphysik” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze I* [“Overcoming Metaphysics” in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Chicago, 2003, 84-110, ed.].

(*Gestell*).²⁵ Technology becomes ambiguous.²⁶ This follows from the recognition that if it is biased and merely conditioned (given) then technology also refers to other potential ways of living with and within it. Technology cannot be reduced to a metaphysical leading figure to our present.²⁷ It is also a potential and necessary guide to a transition to a new way of acting in our world.

We demand of a philosophy that takes as its concern a time so strongly affected by the negative impact of our relations to people and nature²⁸ that it no longer restricts itself to a choice between technocracy and a romantic return to nature, but that it designates possible other, non-metaphysical beings of technology that would enrich our human acts.

So as not to get bogged down in cultural criticism and abstract utopianism it is imperative for an attempt at such a philosophy to de-structure the metaphysical grounds that shape our present understanding of technology.²⁹ What we suggest here will soon be realised: most solutions considered today – and that includes radical proposals – are contained within a metaphysical frame, and therefore they are from the outset incapable of instigating fundamental change.

3. The necessary destruction of the basic tenets of metaphysics

a) *The human as subject and the question of a social ethic*

The demarcation of the human as subject, with its mathematically operationalizable and objectifiable correlate, continues to play a key part in the denomination of our relation to the world.³⁰ The human subject stands against the objective world. He wants to understand how the world works; however, his acts in it will change the world. Understanding how acts are grounded in will³¹ is simply a different way of describing the “challenge” effective in technology. Ethics are given through how subjects are instructed to act correctly.³² This is the manner in which we often hear of a plan for an “Ethic for a time of technology”.³³ On the other hand we can also observe many failed contemporary attempts to realise a human ethic. Either our ethical models have no effect and circumvented when they encounter unforeseen contexts³⁴, or they reveal an unquestionably dogmatic, violent and inhuman character in their elitist and undemocratic pretensions.³⁵ These considerations give expression to the familiar condition that the subject (*Individuum* or person) has an ever-decreasing part to play in society, so much so that it is on the verge of becoming an ideological chimera. Usually attempts to bypass this tendency make references to a principle of humans’ social character, providing a ground for an analysis of social conditions that includes requisite instructions for how persons should act.

b) *The intersubjective character of language: conditions for society as communicative community*

One influential way to avoid the problem of the subject in a time of technology is to propagate a model where language realises a communicative community. As Marx noted, “language is practical consciousness that exists also

²⁵ We avoid using Heidegger's concepts on purpose here. What he refers to is his notion of “fateful sending” which uncovers the “granting” of the “essence of technology”. See Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik”, op.cit., 31.

²⁶ In the history of philosophy the horizon we describe here is given the term “metaphysics”. See also Heidegger, “Überwindung der Metaphysik”.

²⁷ Op.cit., 33.

²⁸ Growing awareness of the vulnerability of our environment would in the broadest sense provide a concrete reason for maintaining Heidegger's thought. In philosophical terms the “dissonance” of contemporary consciousness provides sufficient stimulation.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, op.cit., 6: “The task of the destruction of the history of ontology” (*Die Aufgabe der Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie*); destruction can also have the sense of deconstruction, i.e., as the recovery of an original.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche II*, Pfullingen, 1961 [*Nietzsche*, vols. 1-2, trans. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco, 1991, ed.]; and the section “Metaphysics as History of Being” (*Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins*) [in Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Stambaugh, op.cit., 1-54, ed.].

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, Pfullingen, 1959, 31 [*Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, New York, 1995, ed.].

³² Science is not mentioned here. For a further discussion see Wolfgang Schirmacher, *Zur Radikalkritik an der Technik beim späten Heidegger*, Diss., Hamburg, 1973.

³³ Lenk, op. cit.

³⁴ An ethic that we cannot comply with is pointless. See, e.g., the rejection of Kant's ethics in the justice reform of the [then] Federal Republic of [Western] Germany.

³⁵ This could remind us of the ethics of fringe groups (subcultures, sects, etc.).

for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.”³⁶ Habermas gives expression to this theory in his assertion that our communicative competency precedes our linguistic skills.³⁷ In programmes quite given over to social change it becomes a theory which propagates the idea of a “communicative society as the transcendental condition for social sciences”.³⁸

Language continues to be interpreted instrumentally, only now as a “social” subject that nevertheless still acts as self-consciously on nature as the isolated subject once did.³⁹

The onto-theological condition of metaphysics⁴⁰ cannot be denied. Here a brief reference to it must suffice: the law of non-contradiction secures the identity that provides the ground for both science and social acts. The human world is divided and our mastery (*Herrschaft*) is abandoned in dichotomous terms.⁴¹ Yet, the principle of sufficient reason grounds a hierarchical structure that is given as much in the question of our transcendental condition as it is in the priorities’ necessary “validity”.⁴² A destruction of these metaphysical conditions in order to prepare the ground for a new technological reality would limit the law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason to their one-sided meaning. We shall in what follows merely make a brief remark on the question of whether a Marxist approach to technology can respond to this requirement.

c) Materialist-dialectic conditions of society and the problem of technology

In dialectical materialism desubjectivation appears to have progressed to the utmost. “Contexts” and “people”, “nature and history” are dialectically interconnected terms. Hegel’s followers “suspend” the dichotomies of our understanding and thinking in their dialectical approach.⁴³ Even language is no longer approached as an instrument.⁴⁴ It is nevertheless clear that the Marxist treatment of the problem and social effects of technology is curiously “naive”. Within their optimistic view of social progress technology is limited to an in principle unproblematic component of socialist society.⁴⁵

III. The consequences of a radical critique of technology for an outline of social acts

A radical critique of the metaphysical dichotomous structure of our conception of reality should not deny the diversity of our world; it merely seeks to question the legitimacy of an approach to the world conceived in contradictory terms (e.g., subject-object, theory-practice). By absolving ourselves from these dichotomies we can engage with a topology closer to reality.⁴⁶ With such an approach we will appraise our issues in accordance with their contexts, or, to put it more precisely, *as* their contexts. They are not primarily forced into conditions (relations) but are allowed to unfold from their “contexts”.⁴⁷ Such a social course of action clearly acts radically against the present.⁴⁸

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 3, Berlin, 1969, 30 [*The German Ideology*, quoted from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a3>, ed.].

³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz” in Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*, Frankfurt am Main, 1971, 101-141.

³⁸ Thus also the title of the essay by Karl-Otto Apel in *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 2/3, 1972, 1-40.

³⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als “Ideologie”*, Frankfurt am Main, 1968.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, op.cit., 64-73.

⁴¹ Op.cit., 11; cf. Pierre Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, Paris 2, 1966.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, Pfullingen, 1957.

⁴³ Wolfgang Schirmacher, “Zum Wissenschaftsbegriff in Hegels ‘Wissenschaft der Logik’“, *Ninth International Congress on Hegel*, Antwerpen, 1977.

⁴⁴ Joseph Stalin, *Marxismus und Sprachwissenschaft*, Berlin, 1951 [*Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, Moscow, 1954, ed.].

⁴⁵ Hermann Ley, *Technik und Weltanschauung*, Jena, 1971; Heidegger also calls for the renunciation of the order function of *Time* and *Being*. See Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, Tübingen, 1969, 1.

⁴⁶ Otto Pöggeler, “Metaphysik und Seinstopik bei Heidegger”, *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 70, 1962, 15 [“Metaphysics and topology of being in Heidegger” in *Man and World*, vol. 8, no. 1, 3-27, ed.].

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, op.cit., 15.

⁴⁸ A radicalism of action; see however Marx, *Marx-Engels-Werke*, vol. 3, op.cit., 20.

In a radical critique the hierarchical form (e.g., disputes over priorities and destructive competitive thinking) is also destroyed. Here it is appropriate to clarify what we mean by how an “ordered” typology can indicate connections between people and things⁴⁹ (“nature conservation”⁵⁰ and “people’s releasement”⁵¹).

It is crucial that topologies and “orders” are not limited to one kind of world-being (e.g., to people) but that they are universal. Every demarcation will necessarily remain preliminary and can always be exceed. This excess is without purpose and yet it is driven. It liberates people to what Heidegger referred to as “hearing” (*Hören*), i.e. as a potential cosmic “constellation” of a different “essence of technology”. Here it is finally possible to decide on human and social interaction: our path does not depart from society but is heading towards it.

Authors’ contributions

This is an original work by Prof Wolfgang Schirmacher first published in 1973. It was translated by Torgeir Fjeld for publication with this journal.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Order of Things*, New York, 1994.

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, “Bauen, Wohnen, Denken” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze III*, op.cit. [“Building Dwelling Thinking” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Hofstadter, op.cit., 143-159, ed.].

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, op.cit.